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Gender Trouble in Town: Educated Women Eluding Male Domination, Gender Violence and Marriage in PNG

Ceridwen Spark

Following Zimmer-Tamakoshi's observations about educated Pacific women not wanting to marry their countrymen, I examine educated Papua New Guinean women's perspectives on marrying Papua New Guinean men. Women in this group avoid marriage because they fear such relationships will destroy their career prospects, compromise their economic and decision-making independence and force them to grapple with male jealousy and violence in the domestic realm. In short, educated Papua New Guinean women perceive partnerships with their countrymen as being more troublesome than they are worth. The women's attitudes and actions suggest an emerging trend with important implications for understanding (both) the relationship between gender and education and intimate relationships in Papua New Guinea.

Keywords: Gender; Education; Papua New Guinea; Male Jealousy; Violence, Intimate Relationships; Women's Career Development; Dual Roles

Introduction

In 2007, I travelled to Papua New Guinea (PNG) to interview educated women about their lives. While there, I met Marie, a twenty-five-year-old law graduate. When asked to consider whether she had a role model or person she admired, Marie said: 'Yes. I saw an expat [expatriate] woman at the Jackson's airport once when I was about six years old. She was in charge of some men and she looked very powerful in her red suit.' Later, Marie elaborated, saying she remembered this woman carrying a two-way

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radio on which she was issuing orders, while at the same time 'telling a group of guys what to do'. Marie said 'the image of her just stayed in my head . . . I wanted to be like her, I wanted to do that'.

At the time Marie saw the woman in the red suit, she occupied a completely antithetical position. At the age of four, and as the third daughter in a family of five, Marie had been sent away from her family in Port Moresby to her father's village in the Central Province. Her father had done this because he wanted one of his daughters to be raised among his people—specifically, for her not to be educated in town. Marie says being in the village was a very unhappy time for her because she was 'treated like a slave'. She begged to be permitted to return to Port Moresby and her mother eventually allowed her to do so, despite the tension this decision created between her parents.

Positioned within her father's life expectations as the female child who would uphold the traditional expectations of his patrilineal people, Marie experienced that role as one of oppression. The white woman at the airport embodied an alternative model of gender, one in which women gave the orders, and thus one which was precisely counterposed to the one Marie's father had in mind for her. In her unwillingness to embody the culturally sanctioned versions of womanhood prescribed by her father, Marie is representative of the educated Papua New Guinean women I spoke with during the course of this study.

The study draws on research conducted in November and December 2007. I interviewed twenty-seven tertiary-educated women in two urban contexts (one coastal and one in the highlands). In both locations, I contacted the women with the assistance of a friend who lived and worked in town.¹ The research participants were aged between 23 and 48. Of the twenty-seven women, only four had partners at that point in their lives. Prior to the interview, each participant completed an eight-page questionnaire in which she was asked a range of demographic questions as well as questions about her experiences as an educated woman in PNG. The women then took part in semi-structured interviews which included questions about background and childhood, especially in relation to education and equity, as well as questions about university studies and career and current prospects. The interviews were subsequently transcribed for the analysis. I use pseudonyms and omit the details of the women's backgrounds, current locations and workplaces.

In this article, I discuss one of the key findings, namely: the unwillingness of educated women to marry their countrymen. I argue that educated women avoid marriage because they fear such relationships will destroy their career prospects, compromise their economic and decision-making independence and force them to grapple with male jealousy and violence in the domestic realm. The attitudes and actions of this small but significant group suggest an emerging trend with important implications for understanding (both) the relationship between gender and education and intimate relationships in PNG.

Changing Gender Roles and Violence

Discussing the conditions conducive to the escalation of violence against women, Krug et al. (2002, p. 99) state that: 'Intimate partner violence will be highest in societies where the status of women is in a state of transition.' They argue:

Where women have a very low status, violence is not "needed" to enforce male authority. On the other hand, where women have a high status, they will probably have achieved sufficient power collectively to change traditional gender roles. Partner violence is thus usually highest at the point where women begin to assume non-traditional roles or enter the workforce.

It is apt to describe the status of educated women in PNG as 'in transition'. While women living in towns are more likely than their rural-dwelling counterparts to be tertiary-educated and employed in the formal sector, the society in which they live and work continues to be strongly patriarchal. Indeed, despite the nation's much discussed cultural diversity, strong traditions of male dominance and privilege persist in most parts of the country.

One of the privileges associated with power is the capacity to define roles in order to serve one's own interests. In urban PNG, men have little to gain from supporting greater equality between men and women, at least in the short-term. On the other hand, they can defend their own interests and negate the potential power of educated and employed women by vilifying them as traitors to their sex and, simultaneously, 'traditional culture'. Consequently, in PNG, challenges to women's participation in education and the workforce frequently are achieved via appeals to idealised versions of gender roles as they are constructed in the supposedly more 'authentic' location of the 'village'. (It is no accident that Marie was sent to the village and away from education to become the 'traditional' woman her father wanted her to be).

Conversely, men's zealous pursuit of modernity seems to pose no comparable threat. That elevating women's status is not only seen as 'too modern' but also foreign, is evident in the resistance many male Parliamentarians have to the idea of creating reserved seats for women in the PNG Parliament.² Opponents of the Bill to reserve twenty-two seats for women attack foreign supporters like AusAID and UNIFEM for encouraging women to take up 'imported' (i.e. 'non-traditional') versions of womanhood.³ As Engle Merry has noted, because 'human rights ideas displace alternative visions of social justice that are less individualistic and more focused on communities and responsibilities' (2006, p. 4), women who state the case for gender equity through reference to human rights can readily be portrayed as promoting individual ideas of autonomy at the expense of the uneducated women living in villages who make up the majority of PNG's population.

The distinction between 'traditional' and 'modern' women is characterised by Dickson-Waiko (2001) as the difference between *ol grassroots mama* (grassroots mothers) and *ol save meri* (educated women). Discussing this, Jolly (2003, p. 142) writes that this has proved a difficult distinction in the Pacific 'because it names an emergent difference of class which . . . is at odds with the representation of countries

like PNG as “egalitarian” (see also Jolly 1992). In the contemporary setting, moreover, gender inequity coexists with class difference (see Wardlow’s discussion of how *pasinja meri* exacerbate class-based humiliations by choosing to have sex only with men who can pay, 2005, p. 62) and in this schema, educated women are portrayed as ‘inauthentic and non-representative’ (Macintyre 2000, p. 153, see also Jolly 2005). As Jolly (2003, p. 143) notes, this construction of educated women is ‘unduly . . . divisive’. Nevertheless, the notion that there is an authentic version of PNG womanhood is readily utilised to exclude women from power.

Within a ‘traditionalist’ framework, a ‘good wife’ is subservient to her husband, enhancing his status by taking care of his pigs, gardens and children. Despite the obvious irrelevance of subsistence roles for tertiary-educated, urban-dwelling women in PNG, the ‘authenticating claims of tradition’ (Jolly 1997, p. 135) exert their sway through constructed versions of womanhood in which female subservience is central. Consequently, challenging male authority in any way—or even being perceived to do so—still results in a beating in many parts of the country. Eves (2007, p. 24) has discussed the ‘triggers’ that give rise to men’s violence against women, including ‘not looking after the pigs, playing cards, gossiping, embarrassing the husband in public, not paying due respect to his relatives or paying too much to her own, or even speaking English’. On the basis of my discussions with educated Papua New Guinean women, I would add some other ‘modern’ ‘triggers’ to the sin of ‘speaking English’, namely: having a higher paid job or more status at work, being late home and being better educated than one’s husband.

The above ‘sins’ are deemed so because the benefits associated with modernity—including participation in formal education and the economy—continue to be seen overwhelmingly as masculine entitlements. In keeping with the view that contemporary versions of masculinity—like contemporary violence—have much ‘continuity with the past’ (Macintyre 2008, p. 180), the idea that education and employment are male prerogatives often is explained as an extension or extrapolation of men’s traditional roles in the public domain. Overlaying this, however, is the fact that ‘during the colonial period all the administrative, educational and employment opportunities were geared towards men, and many such expectations and attitudes are still present today’ (Crossley 1988, p. 6). It is also important to note that ‘education as a vital avenue to a coveted lifestyle of modern affluence (has) become highly restrictive’ (Gewertz & Errington 1999, p. 135). Far from being a guarantor of participation in the formal economy, ‘being educated’ only seems to increase frustration and disappointment among those who have been taught to associate education with privilege, but who nevertheless find themselves unemployed and thus dependent on the subsistence economy. These factors make for a competitive environment and help to explain why there exists little to no evidence of gender equality in any of the areas of health, education, employment and politics in PNG. This also explains why women with tertiary degrees and who are employed in, or seeking to enter, the professional workforces are anomalous and readily construed as pariahs. As Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1993a, 1997) writes, the antagonism directed against

this group serves the interests of men in power while also feeding the insecurities of men and women in PNG who feel themselves to be disenfranchised from power and opportunity (see also Gewertz & Errington 1999 and Wardlow 2005).

International studies indicate the many benefits of education for women, including that education level and high socioeconomic status *generally* offer some protection against the risk of physical violence by an intimate partner (Sugarman & Frankel 1996, Krug et al. 2002, p. 99, Boyle et al. 2009, Vives-Cases et al. 2009). Assumptions about the benefits of educating women underpin the third Millennium Development goal namely to 'Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women' by eliminating 'gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and to all levels of education no later than 2015' (http://www.mdgender.net/goals/mdg_3.php). Without disputing the many benefits of educating women in developing countries, it is necessary to note that education is by no means a panacea against violence. Indeed, in some circumstances, including those where women are more educated than their male partners (thereby constituting a perceived threat to their dominance) and in situations where there is widespread acceptance of mistreatment (see Vives-Cases et al. 2009, Nguyen et al. 2008), being educated may exacerbate women's experience of violence. As Boyle et al. (2009, p. 691) write: 'the acceptance of mistreatment at the community level mutes the protective influence of higher education'. In PNG, class tensions, widespread acceptance of physical violence against women—sanctioned under the garb of cultural practices—and a hatred of *meri universiti* as symbols of 'all that is wrong with contemporary Papua New Guinean society' (Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1997, pp. 555–6) appear to make educated women especially vulnerable to violence by intimate partners. Thus, the expectation that educated women are less subject to violence is patently *not* true in PNG where the spectre of the power of *ol save meri*, is constructed not only as a threat to men but also as imperilling PNG 'tradition'.

For these reasons, Eves (2007, p. 55) asserts that: 'in PNG... helping women to gain greater financial independence and to be more assertive of their rights seems to bring more rather than less domestic violence' (see also Josephides 1994, Morley 1994). Scapegoats in a patriarchal society, in which attempts to achieve greater equality between men and women are met with derision rather than support, these women resist some forms of containment by refusing to be subjugated in intimate relationships (see Rosi & Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993, p. 198 for a discussion of elite women's resistance to marriage and the social system).⁴

Unfortunately, few scholars have engaged with this phenomenon in the contemporary context. Seventeen years ago, Zimmer-Tamakoshi published several important articles on the subject. In one of two contributions to Richard Marksburys's collection entitled, *The Business of Marriage: Transformations in Oceanic Matrimony*, the author considers the transition taking place in marriage practices among the Gende, arguing that 'marriage has taken on the characteristics of a business' (Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993b, p. 102), creating resentment between the sexes and the generations. Zimmer-Tamakoshi further explores this point in the chapter she co-authors with Rosi (Rosi & Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993). Providing insight into

the changing nature of marriage among the educated elite in Port Moresby, this chapter highlights the significance of love and romance in contemporary relationships between the sexes, and the upheaval romantic aspirations can cause in a changing society.

In 'Nationalism and Sexuality in Papua New Guinea', a much-quoted article, Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1993a) discusses the perspectives of some men and women in PNG, again focusing particularly on the views of the educated elite. In particular, she argues (p. 62) that by perpetuating a myth of 'chaste and selfless village women . . . male leaders have contained the aspirations of women in their own class while at the same time diverting attention away from the needs and interests of all women'. In another of her contributions, Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1995) discusses the resistance of some educated South Pacific women to forming relationships with men. The reasons why women choose to 'forgo marriage entirely' (Zimmer-Tamakoshi 2005, p. 556) are further elaborated in 'Wild Pigs and Dog Men' (Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1997). In the contemporary, violent scenarios described here, the 'ideal' of the all-sacrificing, hard-working village woman is deployed against women who, by virtue of their education and associated career aspirations, are rendered inauthentic. This dichotomy helps to explain why, despite high expectations from those in donor countries, educated women in Melanesia are rendered less potent to enact change than might be expected on the basis of their education. Indeed, while educated women are hailed internationally as a primary means by which 'development' is made possible, they are often more likely to be vilified than lauded in their societies of origin.

Although discussing non-elite women from a different part of PNG, Wardlow's *Wayward Women: Sexuality and Agency in a New Guinea Society* (2006) is also pertinent to understanding the status of these women as anomalous. While they would be wary of the comparison, there are ways in which educated women who refuse to marry can be likened to the Huli *pasinja meri* (literally passenger women but meaning women who sell sex) she describes. Refusing to use their bodies for social reproduction—'whether productive work or reproductive sex' (Wardlow 2006, p. 73)—they too remain outside the confines imposed by marriage and kin. This choice enables educated women to escape being defined or controlled by marital relationships. Nevertheless, as with the *pasinja meris*, it is a refusal which also renders them vulnerable. In her dissertation about educated 'elite' women, Johnson (1984, p. 187) writes: '[t]hose . . . who, in the bourgeois social life of Port Moresby are single and choose to remain publicly unattached to men are often very marginalised, their opinions belittled and discredited in gossip exchanges simply because they assert their single status'. Not only this, single women are also vulnerable to being seen as able to 'be violated with impunity or even deserving of sexual assault' (Sunderland, cited in Johnson 1984, p. 144). Construed as traitorous 'outsiders', *bikhets* and misfits, educated and unmarried women continue to be susceptible to abuse, including violence in public (in the streets, markets and on buses), their workplaces and especially when partnered, in their families and homes.

Why then, given the stigmatisation of being unmarried, (Krug et al. 2002, p. 96) was the overwhelming majority of the educated women who took part in this research (i.e. 21/27) determinedly single and likely to remain so, at least in the foreseeable future? Documenting what would appear to be a significant shift, I demonstrate that remaining single is an increasingly popular choice among educated women (cf. Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1995, p. 122 and Johnson 1984). This finding elucidates the changing nature of gender relationships among PNG's educated elite. The following research material provides important insight into the effects of education on intimate relationships between men and women in PNG, and how educated women perceive such partnerships as being more troublesome than they are worth.

Marriage as 'More Problems': The Impossibility of Combining Roles

Eare is a twenty-five-year-old single woman from PNG's Gulf Province. She does not come from a privileged background. Indeed, her family often struggled to buy food and other basic items. When her parents divorced, Eare's mother had no job and was forced to rely on extended family for her own and her children's livelihood. Eare says this reliance 'traumatised' her, driving her to succeed academically in an effort to secure her own independence. Despite growing up in a 'very bad' part of Port Moresby, she did well at school and won a scholarship to attend school in a neighbouring overseas country. Here, the teachers instilled in her the idea that 'girls could do anything'. After completing her secondary schooling, Eare decided she 'didn't want to go home'. Accustomed to personal freedom, she found the thought of returning to Port Moresby unappealing. Consequently, she applied for and gained a tertiary scholarship to an Australian university where she completed a degree with honours. She was working in a role commensurate with her tertiary qualifications when I interviewed her.

Responding to a question about 'the problems faced by employed women in PNG?' Eare said:

Marriage is a burden and so most of us delay that. I am single and plan to be for a long while. My expatriate friends joke that I am having doubts about my sexuality and therefore have been single forever but quite frankly I already have a full plate and have no intention of bringing on more problems.

Eare's explicit construction of heterosexual partnership as something that involves 'bringing on more problems' typifies the way educated women in PNG perceive intimate partnerships. Whatever their educational achievements, women in PNG are expected to relinquish their career and education goals once they are in partnerships, married or become mothers. This has much to do with men's perceptions that 'other activities, such as pursuing education, working in organizations, taking paid employment or being politically active, [are] incompatible with traditional maternal roles' (Brouwer et al. 1998, p. 15).

Discussing what she perceives as the almost inevitable consequence of getting married, namely the loss of her own life and career outside the home, Eare said:

for Papua New Guinean females, it's probably difficult to get married young when you're career-minded because your partner may decide what happens to your future or the fact that you're in a marriage is going to determine what happens to you, whether you carry on in your career or you sort of slow down a little bit. And I like to move on.

Eare's desire to avoid marriage because of the containment with which she associates it was shared by most of the women in this study. Referring to her tertiary-educated friends, she says, 'Most of them are very, very career-minded and won't take crap from a guy. We feel that marriage is a burden, it can stop you from doing things that you want to do.'

The following comments illustrate that domestic violence is part of the 'crap' to which Eare refers. Aged 23 and having just finished her law degree, Emma says, 'Why should you get married to a guy and be subjected to all that [referring to domestic violence]. No way, might as well travel the world. Why should I stay in Papua New Guinea and find a husband and be subjected to this? No, I am too good for that.' Twenty-five-year-old Jill was similarly strident: 'Being in a marriage to a Papua New Guinean just won't work out for me. It's just not going to happen. I'd rather retain my independence and my identity rather than take on a man and how he abuses me and his family abuse me and just conform to their ways. No I would never want to do that.'

Others, perhaps unwilling to rule out partnerships and children altogether, say they will get married once they are 'established' in their careers or in their 'late thirties'. For instance, in answer to the question of whether she could see herself getting married, Grace said:

Not yet. I've being brought up in, with the mentality that I have to work hard, get a job, make sure I save up enough money for, to buy a house and car, support myself and my youngest siblings and then I mean establish myself well first before I want to get married so that's the goal that I have to establish myself before getting married. Probably late 30s, I'll be getting married.

In some instances, educated women have had relationships but these have ended precisely because the women would not relinquish or compromise their educational and career goals. This was the case with Cindy, who had recently completed an honours degree at the University of Papua New Guinea and who wanted to go overseas to complete a Masters degree. Having recently broken up with her boyfriend because he could not accept her determination to continue her studies, Cindy said:

The longer we were together he realised that I was very focused on what I wanted to do and I would do it no matter what. And he couldn't cope with that and he felt a bit intimidated and at the fact that I was more focused and more like into my work

and that I had obtained a degree and he hadn't so that was one of the reasons why we parted.

Martha, another final year law student, had also recently ended a relationship with a fellow law student who would not stop pressuring her to be a stay-at-home mother to their two children. Defying his and general societal expectations that she would relinquish her studies and future career because she was a mother, Martha moved out, took the children and now lives with her parents. She said:

[He wanted me] to look after the kids for a while and then probably get back [to study and work] again and I told him "No I just have to keep going because the opportunity might not be there when I come back again". I mean they can say one thing but when you go and stay with them type of thing they'll probably change and I just don't want to subject myself to that.

Both Cindy and Martha's relationships ended because they would not compromise their career aspirations. Ideas about education and employment being masculine entitlements mean that jealousy about what their partners had and might achieve is a significant factor underlying the breakdown of intimate partner relationships in PNG.

As has been demonstrated in this section, (many) Papua New Guinean men find it difficult to cope with the demonstration of independence that women's participation in tertiary studies and professional employment represents. Consequently, when women with whom they are in an intimate relationship pursue these goals, they experience this as enormously challenging: their very masculinity is threatened by what are perceived as inversions of the correct social order. In an effort to reassert control, they are in danger of resorting to violence and frequently do so. Not wanting to subject themselves to this, educated women are delaying or opting out of relationships with men.

Elsewhere (see Spark 2010), I have discussed Molly, a now happily divorced forty-seven-year-old woman from the Western Highlands, whose marriage was characterised by her husband's infidelity, domestic violence and what she repeatedly referred to as 'jealousy' about her professional attainments. Discussing the particularity of '*jełas*', as it is used among the Huli, Wardlow (2006, p. 30) writes:

Although clearly derived from the English word, *jełas* does not refer to jealousy – that is a feeling of hostility toward a rival or someone who is perceived to have an advantage... Rather *jełas* means something more like covetousness or an inordinate and dangerous feeling of desire – for money, for things and sometimes for people.

In my interpretation, the educated women I spoke with used the word jealous in a manner more in keeping with Wardlow's description of it, as it is utilised among the Huli rather than as the word is used in English. The emphasis on desire—in this case, men's desire for educated women to be other than they are—helps to explain why,

even when men are themselves educated and employed they continue to exert energy on subduing their wives, by violence if necessary.

In the next section, I discuss Melissa's experience to illustrate the role of male jealousy, both sexual and professional, in the destruction of intimate partner relationships involving educated women. The intimate link between male jealousy and the drive to reassert control is readily apparent.

'I Just Couldn't Take it Any More': Male Jealousy and Domestic Violence

Aged 26 when I spoke with her, Melissa was educated in a private Christian primary school then awarded a scholarship to attend a girls' high school overseas. She was completing an undergraduate degree at UPNG when she became pregnant, accidentally, to her boyfriend, during her third year of study. Melissa says this is when 'it all got complicated'.

My mum wanted to do things right. She wanted us to get married, well okay my pregnancy wasn't perfect timing and my family obviously didn't agree to you know the whole idea of me being pregnant without completing my degree, without any money to support the child that I was going to have. He, the father, wasn't working, he was also studying, no money so obviously we had to find somewhere to live and we wanted to live together with our child and the only way to do that was to go and live with his family.

Because her partner's family lived in a 'settlement' outside one of PNG's coastal towns, Melissa was forced to move away from her own family and support structures.

In her partner's family, 'village' conventions about the role of a new wife applied. When she moved there, Melissa experienced a period of endless, exhausting labour (paid and domestic) and violence. In addition to having a three-month-old baby and a job in accounting that necessitated a 60–90-minute commute each way, Melissa was required to perform all the duties of a daughter-in-law. As Sales (1999, p. 415) has pointed out, this dual burden not only 'increases inequality', it can make the apparent attractions of work outside the home less appealing to women who struggle to manage these double workloads without support from their husbands and male partners (see also Toft 1985).

The following excerpt gives some insight into the difficulties Melissa faced at this time.

It was really hard, I'd say the worst three months in my life cause I had a young baby, I had a job and you know it was bad enough that I'm living with people whom I'd never met before. I'd wake up at say 5:00 in the morning, I'd leave my baby still sleeping and then just get ready for work and because of the distance travelling home I had to be back by 6:00, 6:30 in the afternoon and I wouldn't have seen my baby all day and when I get home, there's nappies to be washed, food to be cooked, house to be cleaned. And you know he had a really big family, when you are in the village you cook for about ten to twenty people for dinner and you know sometimes there would be enough food for everybody and sometimes there

wouldn't be. I couldn't say much because I was new there to the family and in PNG societies, in-laws, especially being married to their son, you don't speak up much.

If Melissa was late home because she had missed the bus or for some other work-related reason, her husband became jealous, accused her of having affairs and assaulted her. Below, she describes an occasion when he broke her arm, a beating that led to their separation:

He was just there waiting on the road and when I saw him, I said, 'Oh I'm in trouble, oh I don't really', because the minute I saw him I was, I became scared and I was like tiring myself running here and there. I got off the bus, he didn't say a word. I saw him and pretended and went home. I got to the house, you know I saw my baby so I sat on the chair and just got outside the house, just trying to relax. I was so tired. He comes from behind me and knocks me off the chair, he's huge, he's bigger than me so yeah he picks up the chair and starts hitting me with the chair. The only way to protect myself was to put my arm up to stop hitting my face and then he just broke my arm. Okay that's it, I knew I couldn't take it any more and he'd always tell me that because I don't have any relatives where he was, you know where we were staying and you know the other beatings, I just stood because I knew I couldn't run to anyone and you know me always trying to be independent and strong thinking that 'I'll take that, I'll handle this you know it doesn't matter'. And yeah when he broke my arm I just couldn't take it anymore so that's it, this is it. You know I was thinking I'll be too stupid to stay and die, you know because that's where I was heading.

After this particularly violent incident, Melissa contacted her mother (who worked for a non-government organisation educating women about their rights). Melissa's mother drove eight hours to where she was, strode into the house and took the baby. The next day she telephoned and 'told me, "Get on the first bus and you walk out of there and never return," and I went home'. Melissa's mother then agreed to take care of her granddaughter until Melissa had completed her degree and got a job. Melissa had just achieved these things when I met her.

As for the majority of the women I spoke with, Melissa was neither in a relationship nor seeking to be in one. Her experience illustrates that this becomes something of a non-choice, that is, she says, it was either 'stay and die' or end the relationship. Perhaps because they know they are especially vulnerable to concerted efforts to control them (through violence if necessary), educated women tend to represent their decision to avoid relationships with Papua New Guinean men as something of a 'non-choice'. This being the case, until the men change the way they think about their own and educated women's roles, this trouble between the genders will continue.

Romance versus Reality: The Influence of Companionate Ideals

Despite their resistance to forming relationships with educated men, educated women long for mutually supportive and companionate unions. This yearning may be pronounced among this group, for as Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1995, p. 121) points

out, this desire is '[u]ndoubtedly influenced by the worldwide feminist movement, exposure to Christian ethics in church and school, and attractive (if often false) media images of family life in the West'. Women who have spent time in Western countries during their childhood or adolescence are perhaps more likely to idealise such unions. Melissa, for instance, explicitly connected her time overseas with the development of her romantic notions about marriage and family, saying that her house father at boarding school had given her a model of what was possible in a relationship, but which was unrealistic in the context of PNG. Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1993b, 1995, 1997) notes that a number of educated women choose expatriate partners in an attempt to avoid the problems they associate with Papua New Guinean men. Two of the six partnered women who took part in the research are married to expatriate men. The majority of the other unmarried women speculated, with sincerity, about needing to go 'outside PNG' to find men with whom they felt they would have equitable relationships and ones in which they would not be subject to violence. This is not a new phenomenon (see, for example, the discussion of Barbara in Rosi & Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993, pp. 192–4). Nevertheless, as more women travel for education and work, marrying an expatriate does appear to be a realistic option for an increasing number of educated Papua New Guinean women, despite the hostility and contempt such relationships can provoke among relatives and others in PNG.

My discussions with Anna—a woman in her mid-thirties who had spent many of her formative years in a Western country—evidence the desire these women have for companionate relationships, ones in which conversation and task sharing will revolve around mutual respect. Anna wanted very much to 'just communicate [with her partner] without fighting'. Unfortunately, her reality was very different. Anna suffered what appeared to be depression, talking in hushed tones about suicidal thoughts, her despair and sense of entrapment. She discussed these difficulties in relation to her tempestuous partnership with a man from the Highlands, with whom she has four children, and whom she feared losing if she tried to leave him.⁵ Like Melissa, Anna lived with her partner's family and was regularly beaten by her partner because he felt jealous, both about previous relationships he imagined she had had as a 'free' woman and because he thought she considered herself 'superior' to him because of her Western education. Anna's husband's insecurity about her education, far from being individually constructed and experienced, is common among PNG men who perceive women having access to 'the benefits of modernity' as a corruption of the social order. In this context, physically assaulting one's wife is sanctioned socially as a method of re-asserting dominance. Anna had bruises to one side of her face when we spoke. Her desire for a different kind of relationship in which she and her husband could 'sit down and talk nicely together', sharing ideas and experiences, exemplifies Zimmer-Tamakoshi's (1995, p. 121) claim that 'many women [in PNG and other Pacific countries] yearn for more mutually supportive, long-lasting and monogamous unions based on respect and conjugal unity'. Unfortunately, as Anna's case makes

painfully clear, PNG women are largely powerless to realise this ideal in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

International literature suggests that higher socio-economic status and high levels of education can act as protective factors, diminishing the likelihood that women will experience interpersonal violence (Boyle et al. 2009). The above analysis demonstrates that this is far from the situation which prevails in PNG. Furthermore, it makes clear that educated women like *pasinja meris*, who 'break the fence' of male control by delaying and avoiding intimate relationships with men, are likely to be seen as antisocial and destructive and are 'managed' accordingly. The actions of the group examined here reveal a small but significant trend in PNG: namely, the refusal of educated women in their twenties—as well as among their slightly older and divorced counterparts—to sacrifice their autonomy and aspirations to the more confining and (frequently) violent experiences of marriage and child-bearing.

The desire of educated women to avoid relationships with men is a response to the attitudes of men towards women's independence as this autonomy is demonstrated by working outside the home. In resisting, deferring and perhaps ultimately avoiding relationships with Papua New Guinean men, these women embody and demonstrate the very independence and power that so riles and concerns the men, such that the men frequently resort to violent means to 'quell and control women' (Josephides 1994, p. 194). By not entering into intimate relationships with men, educated women avoid the private space of domesticity in which they would be vulnerable to men's retributive violence against them. However, as with the autonomy demonstrated among the *pasinja meris*, the agency these women embody is always 'encompassed'. It is difficult, for instance, for educated women to march into the male corridors of power, when the factors that enable them the theoretical freedom to do this—namely being single and highly educated—are precisely those which mark them as suspect in this domain.

Twenty years ago, Brown (1988, p. 137) speculated that 'a new generation of educated, urbanized . . . women [would] participate in national affairs and politics'. Unfortunately, at this stage in the country's history, educated Papua New Guinean women are more likely to be scapegoats than leaders. Nevertheless, despite the outsider status that being single and educated confers on them at this point in history, these women may still have a better chance of enhancing women's status and participation in PNG than their counterparts who enter into intimate relationships with Papua New Guinean men. At the very least, if the women who took part in this study are any indication, six-year-old girls—such as Marie once was—will not need to turn to expatriate women to find role models.

In this article, I have drawn on qualitative research to demonstrate the complex interaction between gender and education. Highlighting that the benefits of education may not accrue in any given context, the study illustrates the need to

engage with the reality and detail of women's lives. Focusing on educated Papua New Guinean women who live in towns, I have argued the need to take women's sociocultural circumstances into account when considering the meanings and impact of education.

The analysis makes clear that far from being unequivocally liberated by their education; educated women in PNG are better described as embattled. Nevertheless, while it is not a panacea against the various forms of violence to which many Papua New Guinean women are subject, education is seen by many women as a route to economic independence and thus 'the only means they have of avoiding the constraints that men place on their lives' (Macintyre 2000, p. 167). Consequently, despite the anomalous status that continues to be associated with being single, this is an increasingly viable choice among educated Papua New Guinean women seeking to pursue a degree of autonomy and control over their lives and careers.

Notes

- [1] I am indebted to Priscilla Kona and Annemarie Laumaea for publicising this research among their friends and colleagues and for their assistance distributing and collecting questionnaires. I am also very grateful to Associate Professor Martha Macintyre for her scholarly advice and assistance with some of the research costs associated with this project.
- [2] As this article was going to press, discussion and voting on this Bill had just been deferred until May 2011 (see Joku www.postcourier.com.pg/20101126/news03.htm 2010).
- [3] I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this article for valuable points they made about the relationship between appeals to 'tradition' and gender, education and violence in PNG.
- [4] Interestingly, one of the ways these women justified their refusal to be subjugated in intimate relationships, was through reference to their Christianity. In particular, they discussed their belief in a God who gives them the strength to pursue their personal and career goals. Unfortunately, a detailed discussion of the (paradoxical) role of Christianity in allowing these women new freedoms, while at the same time reinscribing conservative versions of womanhood, is beyond the scope of this essay. I do, however, plan to discuss these matters in a future article as, recognising the significance of the women's Christianity, I have since gathered a second round of data investigating the role of religion in educated women's lives.
- [5] In the patrilineal customs of the Highlands, custody of the children almost always is given to the man on the basis that children are part of the 'property' of the marriage. This circumstance prevents many Papua New Guinean women from leaving violent and adulterous relationships.

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